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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

18 February 1988

HAITI: THE CHURCHES, VODOO, AND POLITICS

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Summary

Key Haitian religious institutions continue to have the potential to profoundly affect the course of political events in Haiti. At present, the Roman Catholic Church--finds itself torn between moderate church leaders who are inclined to support President Manigat, and who want to avoid further political polarization and the Church's more radical leftist elements who advocate revolutionary change in Haiti and are vociferously opposed to the new regime. This division will limit the Church's ability to play any central role in assisting Manigat to implement the political and economic reforms needed to consolidate Haiti's transition to democracy. Moreover, a crackdown on the Church as a whole--perhaps in response to some leftwing Catholic subversion--or the perception that Manigat is unwilling or unable to implement real changes might well move the Church to assume a more active opposition role such as it played in the final months of the Duvalier regime.

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The Protestant Churches, representing a growing minority of the population, appear unwilling to jeopardize their religious missions in Haiti by

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becoming too active in politics. Although the federation of Protestant Churches in Haiti publicly denounced the presidential election on 17 January as illegitimate, Protestant leaders generally counsel national reconciliation and popular acceptance of the new government while reiterating calls for eventual free elections. We believe the Protestant Churches are likely to maintain moderate political positions unless the government grows brutally repressive or crosses the threshold to dictatorship. [REDACTED]

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Voodoo, the spiritualist folk religion practiced by most Haitians in conjunction with Christianity, is generally apolitical but may be increasingly used by both the government and opposition groups to further their political agendas. Although the voodoo religion is not easily adaptable to a political ideology--because it is loosely organized and channels disaffection into appeals to the supernatural--certain political themes such as nationalism, xenophobia, and acceptance of arbitrary authority can be reinforced by voodoo beliefs and practices. Firm evidence is lacking, but the pervasive character of voodoo in Haitian society strongly suggests to us that it is likely to remain a significant determinant of popular reaction to political events. [REDACTED]

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The secretive nature of Haitian society raises the possibility that radical Catholic and voodoo elements might be able to clandestinely organize unrest not easily detectable by US and other foreign observers. Such activity could produce sudden popular outbursts for no apparent reason and with little warning to outsiders. In particular, radical Catholic clerics appear to have made progress gaining followers of their liberation theology and their parishes have the potential to become organization cells of a grassroots subversive movement. [REDACTED]

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Haiti is a deeply religious society in which the vast majority of the populace practices a mix of Christianity and voodoo, a tradition-oriented spiritualist faith. Academic studies indicate that about 80 percent of the population is Catholic, reflecting the French colonial heritage. The Catholic clergy, once mainly foreign, became increasingly Haitian in character under the two Duvalier regimes. The US Embassy estimated in 1985 that roughly half of the 600 Catholic priests in the country were Haitian; the rest were French, Belgian, Canadian, or US missionaries. Academic studies also indicate that Protestantism has grown in recent decades and that various denominations now claim about 20 percent of the population as adherents. The fastest growing Protestant Churches appear to be

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Baptist and fundamentalist sects. Most Haitians also adhere to voodoo. Contrary to popular Western belief, voodoo is not a malevolent religion, although elements of witchcraft are common and a small minority of voodoo priests practice black magic. Rather, it is a largely unstructured animist religion whose adherents worship a vast array of deities of African and Haitian origin as well as the Christian God. Most Christian Churches today coexist uneasily with the voodoo religion, with only the Baptists and fundamentalists publicly denouncing it as evil superstition. [REDACTED]

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The Catholic Church

The Catholic Church, once outwardly united and in the forefront of opposition to former President Jean-Claude Duvalier, has become increasingly divided since his overthrow between moderate clerics supporting democracy and militant leftist priests calling for revolutionary change. Embassy and press reports indicate that these divisions existed before Duvalier's ouster from power in 1986, but remained beneath the surface of unified opposition to Duvalier. [REDACTED]

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The Church now appears hesitant and uncertain on how to respond to recent political developments. The Embassy indicates that moderate Church leaders would like to avoid a confrontation with Manigat, remain aloof from partisan politics, and prevent further polarization in the country. Embassy reporting indicates that a majority of Haiti's ten bishops comprising the hierarchy, led by Bishop Francois Gayot of Cap-Haitien, in fact tacitly back the Manigat government and are trying to curb the activities of more radical priests who reject the legitimacy of the new government.¹ To this end, the bishops have strongly condemned the ruling council's maneuvering for rigging the election in Manigat's favor, but have stopped short of calling for antigovernment demonstrations or directly criticizing Manigat. [REDACTED]

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In opposition to the Catholic moderates are priests more openly and vigorously opposed to the Manigat government. Some of these priests espouse Marxist-oriented liberation theology and comprise what is commonly referred to as the popular church or "Ti-legliz" (Creole for "little church"). [REDACTED] the popular church is comprised primarily of small and disparate--but still significant--groups of followers in Port-au-Prince and some rural areas. Popular church leaders in the

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1. The official head of the Haitian Catholic Church, Francois-Wolff Ligonde, Archbishop of Port-au-Prince and Primate of Haiti, largely abdicated his pastoral duties in 1986 because his familial connection to former First Lady Michele Bennett Duvalier undermined his authority, according to Embassy reporting. [REDACTED]

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capital and provincial areas have incited antigovernment protests and, in at least one case, have been responsible for violence. Although the Embassy indicates that one member of the Church hierarchy, Bishop Willy Romelus of Jeremie, actively supports many popular church positions, the most prominent radical cleric is the Reverend Jean-Bertrand Aristide. [REDACTED]

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Embassy reports that Aristide and other leftists priests currently are keeping a low profile, although he circulated cassette recordings of sermons in which he called for revolution following the electoral collapse in November. In the most violent incident linked to the popular church thus far, a militant priest in northwest Haiti armed and incited peasants last July near the town of Jean-Rabel, which led to bloody fighting with as many as 300 dead [REDACTED].

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Radio Soleil, the Church-owned station that played a significant role in undermining the Duvalier regime, has a large audience throughout the country and prominently features the views of the political opposition. Emmanuel Constant, the moderate bishop of Gonaives, is the station's official supervisor, but Embassy reporting indicates that daily programming is directed by a Belgian priest expelled from Haiti by Duvalier in 1985 for making antigovernment broadcasts. Vatican officials say Radio Soleil, which is funded by a German Catholic organization, operates virtually independently of the Haitian bishops, who sometimes disagree with the station's commentaries but do not attempt to censor them, according to the Embassy in Rome. The station generally goes further than the bishops in criticizing the government, but stops short of endorsing popular church calls for revolution. [REDACTED]

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The Vatican, through its ambassador Archbishop Paolo Romeo, has played only a minor role in Haiti's recent turmoil. The Embassy in Rome reported last Fall that the Vatican was increasingly concerned about the political situation in Haiti, but Church policy was to refrain from direct involvement in politics. Although the Vatican newspaper in Rome has reprinted pastoral letters from the Haitian bishops counseling moderation and criticizing the popular church, we doubt that this has much impact in Haiti. Moreover, Haitian bishops are somewhat estranged from the ambassador, according to a US Embassy source, because they believe he interferes too much in the internal affairs of the Haitian church. [REDACTED]

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The Protestant Churches

Most of the minority Christian denominations--including the Episcopal Church, Methodists, Seventh Day Adventists, Baptists, and Mennonites--continue to favor a cautious or accommodating political stance and have displayed little inclination to risk being thrown out of Haiti because of political activism. The Episcopal Church, for example, recently issued a statement calling for popular acceptance of the new government as the only way to avoid further upheaval. The Embassy says the federation of Protestant Churches also is trying to reach a consensus with the Catholic hierarchy on a strategy to encourage new democratic elections. On balance, however, Protestant leaders, like the Catholic bishops, appear to be uncertain of how to deal with the new government. Some individual protestants, such as former presidential candidate Reverend Sylvio Claude--a Baptist minister with a grassroots following--are active members of the political opposition, but we lack evidence that any significant Protestant counterpart to the Catholic popular church has emerged.

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Voodoo

Voodoo historically has functioned as a social glue in a society largely bereft of strong institutions. Academic studies indicate that most adherents see no contradiction between the simultaneous practice of voodoo and Christianity. As a belief system, voodoo acknowledges the Christian God as a supreme being who presides over a vast array of capricious lesser gods or spirits--many of whom are identical to Christian saints--who require constant veneration and appeasement. Academic studies indicate that although the Catholic Church periodically has mounted unsuccessful antivoodoo campaigns over the years, it--and most Protestant Churches--now maintain an uneasy symbiosis with voodoo.

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Voodoo is outwardly apolitical, but we believe the pervasiveness of its practice gives it an ill-defined--but important--influence on political life. Various academic studies suggest that voodoo as a religion does not easily lend itself to any particular political ideology partly because it channels frustration and social conflict away from political expression into appeals to the supernatural, and militates against rational change. Moreover, voodoo lacks institutional unity; to the extent that it has any organization, it tends toward congregationalism in the form of autonomous temples. For the most part, however, it is practiced primarily on an individual basis without reference to voodoo clergy or institutions. Nevertheless, these same studies indicate that certain political themes are reinforced by voodoo, such as Haitian nationalism, xenophobia, and acceptance of arbitrary authority. Although conclusive evidence is lacking, we believe voodoo has a significant influence on popular reaction to domestic political events that is not readily apparent to foreign observers.

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Clearly, Haitians of various political stripes are trying to use voodoo to further their agendas. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] At the same time, an association of voodoo priests called the Children of Haitian Tradition--known by its Creole acronym, ZANTRAY--belongs to the National Concertation Front, Haiti's largest leftwing confederation. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] leftists were interested in using this group and one Marxist leader reportedly argued [REDACTED] that radical voodoo priests in the group could be used to encourage revolution. We lack evidence, however, that ZANTRAY has played any direct role in fomenting unrest. Moreover, Manigat recently appointed Franck Etienne, a ZANTRAY leader, as Minister of Culture who may function as the government's bridge to the left. [REDACTED]

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Outlook

As potentially important molders of public opinion, the Catholic and Protestant Churches as well as the voodoo priesthood can significantly bolster or seriously undermine the Manigat government, in our view. If they continue to support the government or at least not actively oppose it, Manigat's legitimacy could be enhanced gradually. The Haitian government, in turn, is likely to use whatever Church support it receives to strengthen its arguments for renewed US aid. [REDACTED]

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Moderates in the Catholic Church, in our view, will avoid strident criticism of the new government but will also continue refusing to openly support it over the near term at least. Press reports indicate that no Haitian Catholic representatives attended Manigat's inauguration, and we believe Church moderates will continue to withhold their support at least until the President shows clear evidence that he is making good on his promise to institute democracy and social justice. Should Manigat be unable or unwilling to institute meaningful political and economic reforms over the longer term, we believe Church moderates would intensify their criticism of the government and once again could place the Church in the forefront of the opposition. [REDACTED]

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We judge that most Protestant churches will continue to try to avoid becoming embroiled in politics. Unless Manigat proves to be an intolerably authoritarian or brutal president, the majority of Protestant leaders probably will not go beyond [REDACTED]

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occasional reaffirmations of their support for free elections at some unspecified time in the future. The possible exception is opposition leader Sylvio Claude, whose deep distrust of the military leadership and its ties to the Duvalier regime may preclude his acceptance of the Army-backed government. Nevertheless, the Embassy says Claude is politically erratic and, [redacted] has already sent emissaries to

Manigat. [redacted] Claude may be trying to cut some sort of political deal. [redacted]

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We believe voodoo priests generally will remain outwardly apolitical, although at least tacitly progovernment, particularly if Manigat continues to enhance the stature of the religion. In his inauguration speech, Manigat placed voodoo on an equal footing with the Catholic and Protestant churches. Such symbolic signs of respect toward voodoo, historically disparaged by the elites and intellectuals in Port-au-Prince, may well help Manigat expand his popular support. [redacted]

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[redacted] In those countries--like Haiti--where the Church has been a key community meeting place, leftist priests often have provided a religious justification for revolutionary action. Moreover, parishes and Church groups have adapted as the organizational cells of a radical political movement, [redacted]

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[redacted] Although the popular church in Haiti has not adopted a cohesive political strategy, some antigovernment militants are likely to believe the popular church can become an important institution in coordinating subversive activity over the longer term. Such activity almost certainly would invite a government crackdown on leftist clergy, which, in turn, could encourage moderate Church leaders to adopt more actively antigovernment positions. [redacted]

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Prospects for Sudden Change

The gaps in our knowledge about leftist Church activity, due largely to the impenetrable and isolated nature of rural Haitian society, leaves open the possibility that widespread radical organizing might go largely undetected by us. We suspect that such organizing might never outwardly display the characteristics of a standard political movement but might be able, nonetheless, to incite unrest throughout the country. Should the Haitian government at some point mishandle popular church subversion by lashing out at more moderate Church elements, it would risk a

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tide of popular opposition similar to that which toppled
Duvalier, bringing Haiti once again to the brink of anarchy.

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